

Why are you putting gravel down on our perfectly good asphalt road?

As County Engineers, we want to keep their roads in good condition and make sure they stay that way. Worn out roads, tougher rules, and not enough money makes this a hard job for our road crews.

We all want the best use of our tax dollar. Most of us judge the quality of roads by the condition of the pavement. Rightfully so! The pavement of about a third of the roads in America is in poor condition. Driving on them costs us about \$49-billions a year in auto repairs and maintenance. When we think of good roads, most of us think of good pavement. Our predecessors who took care of roads knew the importance of “good roads”. In the past, our road maintenance budgets generally included enough money for countywide asphalt paving programs.

Today, we need to spend a lot of our road money on fixing problems besides pavement. To meet these demands we are spending less on asphalt paving than in the past. How are we doing this and maintaining our goal for “good roads?” We took a closer look at our pavement maintenance programs. Pavement maintenance falls into two categories: preventive and corrective. We do preventive maintenance before the pavement shows signs of wearing out. This slows down the need for re-paving of the road. We do corrective maintenance after the pavement wears out. Generally we place a new asphalt overlay at this point.

We can do preventive maintenance, often before the pavement looks bad to the driver, at a reasonable cost. Prevention often means putting down a “chip seal.” When using chip seal for pavement preservation we spray hot liquid asphalt on the existing pavement. Then we quickly spread and roll a thin crushed gravel layer. It restores the surface to almost new condition. We place chip seal with our road maintenance crews. It costs about one-fifth the price of a typical asphalt overlay. Using chip seal is cheaper in the end and overall provides better pavement.

To extend the life of asphalt pavement, the key is to apply chip seal when the pavement is still in good condition. After it is completed and has been in use for a while, it is difficult to tell the difference between chip seal and asphalt!

The bottom line? Yes, we are putting gravel down on a perfectly good asphalt road. Using chip seal, however, lets us provide the good pavement the public has come to expect. It also lets us work on less visible but equally important road maintenance functions required to keep up a county road system.

William J. Tabor, P.E., Deputy Director
Mason County Department of Public Works

Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov.